

ARABIC CONSERVATION METHODOLOGIES

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Abstract

As confirmed by countless sites that were included in Unesco's World Heritage List, the historical cities of the Arabic world represent precious witnesses of a unique urban legacy featuring distinct spiritual, social, economic and artistic expressions. Throughout centuries, the cultural traditions of Arabic societies were able to crystallize usually in permanent form. Individual monuments and, especially in complex urban structures, reflect particular modes of articulating space and of integrating visual art into architectural structures. Through such crystallization processes, a great variety of regional expressions of Arabic heritage has been produced, translating the basic attitudes of a religion that put strong emphasis on ritualized forms of social conduct and individual behavior, but was also able to integrate local traditions responding to specific environmental factors with surviving pre-Arabic heritage leading to a Sustainable Arabic Legacy.

It is within this wider cultural debate between utopia and nostalgia that we have to position the issue of historical cities and to search for solutions capable of maintaining and developing them as vibrant generators of meaningful civic life, rather than lifeless empty shells or mere economic assets in the service of modern tourism – a phenomenon that is largely fuelled by people's frustration with the sterility of their modern urban environment.

The concept of historical urban landscapes is not absolutely new as one finds traces of this new ideology partially expressed in theories and International documents dating back to the 1930's as well. What is new and significant perhaps is the changed perception at the potential of this concept, of not treating these urban areas as static objects of admiration but as living spaces for sustainable communities (Rodwell, 2007).

Some key points regarding Conservation of Historic Urban Landscapes are listed as follows: Conservation of material architectural culture retains its place even today but is augmented by enhancing the intangible cultural values by present adaptations and future transmissions; of not saving them as museum pieces but as living spaces, by understanding the fact that they undergo dynamic and continual changes, thus recognizing the change in value judgments; of protecting urban environments of which authentic and integrated character contributes to local and national identity, and on a broader scale to global heritage; of protecting their environmental character by giving due importance to their settings, endangered by natural and ecological factors or destructive human interventions; of protecting the socio-economic and cultural character of the associated communities by recognizing these values and by retaining and re-interpreting, enhancing and enriching them further; by realizing that all economic, social, cultural and environmental assets/capitals of urban environments are finite resources; thus integrating and combining economic, social, cultural and environmental development aspects, thereby promoting sustainable Urban Architectural Conservation has thus moved on from preserving the present past to conserving the future.

Keywords: Arabic societies, conservation methodologies

Article

The historic cities of the Arabic world represent precious witnesses of a unique urban legacy featuring distinct spiritual, social, economic and artistic expressions. Throughout centuries, the cultural traditions of Arabic societies were able to crystallize in individual monuments and in complex urban structures that reflect particular modes of articulating space and of integrating visual art into architectural structures. Through such crystallization processes, a great variety of regional expressions of Arabic heritage has been produced, which translated the basic attitudes of a religion that put strong emphasis on ritualized forms of social conduct and individual behavior, but was also able to integrate local traditions responding to specific environmental factors and surviving Arabic heritage.

The term “Historic Urban Landscape” that would be used in the context of historic Arabic cities combines architectural and agricultural connotations. It links crystalline physical outcomes to natural growth processes. Seen in this light, historic urban landscapes could be interpreted as the result of a progressive unfolding of cultural seeds that have taken roots in the ground and that, guided by spiritual archetypes and corresponding patterns of human conduct, produce particular urban morphologies espousing the natural topographic constraints of given places. (Bianca, 2011)

Organic growth processes of this type are always driven from within. They evolve by accumulating successive layers of structures and meaning, thereby generating the precious qualities of specific genius loci which are the pervading spirit of a place. (Giovannoni, 1913) Hence, they are radically different from the artificial products of current mechanistic planning modes, which are based on abstract rational schemes imposed that are unable to dispense the sense of identity that connects people with their physical environment. The existence or absence of an inner source of life is what makes the difference. Therefore, sustaining Historic Urban Landscapes is, above all, a matter of reviving and strengthening these inner forces, rather than merely preserving the outermost layer of crystallization.

Stefano Bianca, *Beyond Conservation : Towards Viable Rehabilitation Concepts for Historic Urban Landscapes in the Islamic World, 2011.*

Gustavo Giovannoni, *L'urbanisme face aux villes anciennes*, with an introduction by Francoise Choay, Seuil, Paris (1998); first published as *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova*, UTET Libreria, Rome (1931); second edn, CittaStudi Edizione, Rome (1995). Giovannoni first set out the principal elements of his thesis in a set of papers that were published in 1913 under the title *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova: il quartiere del Rinascimento in Roma.*

The accumulated architectural and urban expressions of Arabic cultures, as far as they have resisted the effects of time, belong to history and yet they continue to have a strong presence, due to the timeless values they incorporate. Following the above thoughts on Historic Urban Landscapes, this begs the question whether they should solely be considered in terms of frozen artifacts of a previous past, or whether they possess an inherent potential of future life and evolution. It is believed that Historic Arabic cities represent an important resource for revisiting the design of the contemporary built environment in the Middle East and for shaping a richer urban future.

Their potential mission in this respect becomes particularly evident against the background of current globalization trends, as based on modern Western development paradigms. Reflecting 19th-century materialistic ideologies and amplified by ever increasing technological leverage, unilateral modern development trends have exerted a totalitarian grip over the human mind and have resulted in enormous losses with respect to local cultural heritage, to historic urban landscapes and to natural resources. All around the world, a wealth accumulated over centuries and millenaries is being depleted at incredible speed, and the Arabic region is no exception. Hence, preserving the genetic pool of natural and cultural variety from which future generations will be able to draw, has become an urgent task that must be integrated into modern development strategies. (Bianca, 2011)

Revitalizing historic cities must be seen as an essential part of that objective. While there is growing awareness today that human civilization as a whole has reached a critical turningpoint, the directions proposed differ widely. There are those who believe that ever new technologies and unrestricted economic liberalization will be able to cure the very problems generated by them, and there are those who would like to turn back the wheel by taking recourse to conservative or outright fundamentalist ideologies that negate the potential benefits inherent to modernity. In between these extremes, a third way seems to emerge, pursued by those who believe that new tools to heal a damaged natural and cultural environment must be invented – and that some of these tools can be found by reinterpreting and adapting age-old pre-industrial principles that have long been discarded by Modernism.

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It is within this wider cultural debate between utopia and nostalgia that we have to position the issue of historic cities and to search for solutions capable of maintaining and developing them as vibrant generators of meaningful civic life, rather than lifeless empty shells or mere economic assets in the service of modern tourism.

With regard to the case of historic cities in the Arabic world, one is struck by the speed with which destruction has taken place during the second half of the 20th century in the name of narrow-minded visions of “progress”, either by letting traditional urban structures decay beyond repair, or by deliberately replacing them with modern substitutes that, while being “functional” in a limited utilitarian sense, lack the human qualities that were the hallmark of traditional structures. The reasons why this cultural shock took place so abruptly is a subject of its own. Suffice it to mention here the delayed impact of European 18th/19th-century colonization, followed by the sudden thrust of unreflected Modernism that started emerging when Arabic countries reached political independence in the mid-19th century. (Bianca, 2000)

Paradoxically, political autonomy gave rise to even stronger cultural and economic dependence on hegemonial Western development paradigms – probably because Western educational, institutional and economic systems established during colonial times were simply adopted and continued without considering their negative impact on pre-existing local cultural traditions.

Stefano Bianca, “Urban Form in the Arab World – Past and Present”, Zürich/ London/ New York, 2000.

Having traced as concisely as possible, the highlighting of some of the essential structural qualities of historic Arabic cities, in order to clarify the reason why their regeneration is desirable and necessary and why conservation alone will not suffice. As implied in the concept of Historic Urban Landscapes, these architectural features are by no means random or gratuitous formal expressions; they are the tangible manifestation of inner beliefs, motivations and corresponding behavioral archetypes that have governed individuals as well as the society as a whole. Conservation may preserve and freeze them in terms of “crystallized” cultural artifacts, but can hardly keep them alive, let alone create equivalent new structures. For trying to repair or reproduce the outer appearance without addressing the vital forces that have to animate and sustain the cells of the underlying organism as a whole would be a futile exercise.

The first highlighted essential structural quality would be that of forging and sustaining authentic living communities which is accomplished by the qualities of an urban environment that, through its pedestrian scale and through qualitative configurations of urban space, fosters closeness and interaction between residents. It provides spatial sequences and architectural articulations that appeal to the sensorial perception of its inhabitants and incorporate symbolic messages. The deep structure of the urban fabric passively reflects and actively shapes specific cultural codes and attitudes, thus strengthening the correlation between social patterns and the respective physical environment. The evident inner unity

between interacting spiritual and physical dimensions commits and engages the users of urban space; it stimulates them to incorporate and enact shared cultural values on daily basis and thus generates a collective sense of identity. (Giovannoni, 1913)

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In the particular case of Arabic towns, the deep structure of the urban fabric is defined by a polyvalent civic center at pedestrian scale focused around the main center that interconnects all strands of public life. The core Mosques or Churches itself is a paradigm of the unity between religious and mundane concerns, since traditionally it served not only a prayer hall, but also as a meeting place, an educational facility and, particularly its courtyard, as a leisure space, thus constituting a focal point for community purposes. Meanwhile, domestic life is set off from the public domain and protected as an almost sacred private space. Residential communities are largely self-contained and strengthened by an architectural clustering of houses and neighborhoods that emphasizes social and physical solidarity between neighbors. A highly differentiated system of street hierarchies, gates and thresholds controls and manages the transitions between public and private territories. All these spatial provisions reflect a code of conduct inspired by customs.

The second highlighted essential structural quality would be that of rooting people in specific places is a matter of emotional interaction between residents and their built environment. In medieval cities, individuals and social groups had much more freedom to mold and manage their own living space than is now the case in bureaucratically governed modern cities and their industrially produced housing compounds. Moreover, due to the ongoing, incremental renewal of individual cells of the urban body, as opposed to the wholesale demolition and construction of complete areas, people's personal nexus with their living space could develop in much more intense ways. The more they were involved in shaping their own built environment, the more they were able to identify with it. Rather than being reduced to the state of an anonymous commodity, architecture thus became an animated and personalized shell responding to people's actual living patterns and mirroring their emotional engagement.

In the particular case of Arabic towns, rooting of the inhabitants was highly favored by the patterns of the private precinct and the courtyard house, ubiquitous archetypes that were prevalent in most urban places of the Arabic world. The house as an autonomous container, open towards the dome of heaven and focused around its own center, produced a particularly strong personalization of family space. Moreover, while forming largely independent and self-sufficient entities, the residential units were themselves embedded in larger housing clusters, which produced extremely coherent urban structures. The fact that each house was a Holon contained inside a larger Holon, ultimately encompassing the complete town, accounts for the cellular and "organic" nature of historic Arabic cities. It also explains why it is impossible to intervene on single units or monuments without considering the wider urban context to which they adhere. (Bianca, 2011)

The third highlighted essential structural quality would be that of providing inspiration and meaning to human life no longer is a concern pursued by today's commoditized architectural production. More often than not, the spiritual reality sustaining man and nature is being ignored or suppressed. Nevertheless, the emergence of all sorts of poor compensations suggests that the human thirst for meaning is still alive. What all pre-modern traditions, including medieval cultures in Europe and the Arabic world, had in common was the urge to reflect higher forms of being in tangible human artifacts, a task that was performed by their builders, artists and craftsmen. Built structures had to relate to, symbolize or physically

embody cosmic principles that shaped the respective culture, in order to connect people with the one and ultimate reality that was their source of life. The specific way in which the sacred dimension was translated and “materialized” into rituals, buildings and space configurations has always defined the individual character and identity of ancient cultures. Modern secularization, the transformation of a society from close identification with religious values and institutions toward nonreligious values and secular institutions, has weakened this bond, with the result that the sacred content has often surrendered to surrogates of ideological nature that are neither anchored in metaphysical grounds nor in sensory human experience and are therefore unable to animate the built environment.

In the specific case of Arabic towns, the sacred was not limited to specific religious buildings or monuments but conceived as being omnipresent in God’s creation. This perspective has deeply informed the non-figurative visual arts of the Arab religion.

Stefano Bianca, *Beyond Conservation : Towards Viable Rehabilitation Concepts for Historic Urban Landscapes in the Islamic World, 2011.*

The brief description of the medieval Arabic city in the foregoing paragraphs admittedly refers to architectural and social archetypes of an ideal nature. In the present incarnation of Arabic towns, many of their traditional features are still transpiring, but at the same time, they are fused with modern-day influences and realities that add new aspects to it. (Bianca, 2011)

Today, in Arabic historic urban structures, as far as they have survived, are generally inhabited by a much poorer segment of the population. This population’s way of life at this stage of its development lacks the means to properly maintain the architectural patrimony. Nevertheless, in spite of unavoidable demographic and economic changes, new social networks and collective identities have emerged that match the historic fabric and thus have the potential to keep it alive while adapting it to changing circumstances.

For these communities, one of the major assets of the historic site is its close ties between living and working within a warm pedestrian environment that in most cases has remained at the very center of a growing urban mass. The asset of centrality, however, also gives rise to a major threat, inasmuch as it is the reason for historic areas becoming potential targets for speculative urban redevelopment, particularly once their physical conditions have declined. Hence the confrontation between two divergent claims based on radically opposed agendas arises. On one hand, there are desperate calls for conservation of an increasingly dilapidated but culturally precious historic fabric, and, on the other hand, the economic pressures for demolition and wholesale redevelopment, often in conjunction with cutting new vehicular access roads through the body of the old city.

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The polarization into these radical alternatives obscures the possibility, and actually the need, to search for a far more appropriate intermediate option that would consist in sustaining the continuous evolution of the historic city as a living entity according to its own morphological premises and constraints. This choice would have to build on mobilization and in-depth revitalization of existing communities, combined with a discerning mix of plot-by-plot conservation and renewal of existing physical structures – both with the objective of keeping local cultural traditions alive. The result may be a hybrid that creatively connects tradition and innovation, thus maintaining the authentic spirit of the place. It appears as the only viable option, because archaeological conservation methods may be applicable to single monuments of exceptional value, but “freezing” complete parts of a vibrant urban fabric is socially and economically unfeasible.

Meanwhile, wholesale redevelopment according to alien modern planning and design standards is equally undesirable, as it would mean the collapse of the existing physical fabric and of the corresponding socio-economic networks.

Indeed, as stated earlier, the only way to transcend the sterile contradictions between past and future, conservation and development, is to opt for the regeneration of local societies from within, by engaging and strengthening the intrinsic powers of culture as prime sources of rejuvenation, creative assimilation and community identity. Recently, international organizations such as UNESCO have moved precisely in this direction, by questioning the conventional modern development paradigm and upgrading “Culture” to a comprehensive notion that would serve as matrix for a complete vision of human needs and aspirations. “Culture” would thus have to absorb and to reform certain concepts of unilateral “Development” rooted in European 19th-century positivism that went out of control, as soon as they limited themselves to the promotion of isolated quantitative and material aspects of life. Through this revision, Culture would reclaim its seminal importance, rather than being reduced to marginal activities, such as folklore, museums, historic research, etc. Reclaiming its central position is, however, not synonymous with promoting homogenized forms of Culture. On the contrary, to reach the necessary depth and to be productive, Culture needs to be grounded in the regional and the local context for only by incorporating itself in distinct and diverse local communities will it be able to act as an antidote to sweeping globalization trends that are fuelled by uncontrolled economic forces.

Attractive as the holistic vision of “Culture” may be in theoretical terms, it has yet to be translated into the daily operational practice of governments, municipal administrations, city planners, donor organizations, etc. who are responsible for conceiving and implementing urban rehabilitation programs in Arabic regions. In order to penetrate the corresponding policies and procedures, the vectors of Culture need to be, first, acknowledged and, second translated in such ways, that they can interact with and, if necessary, change conventional planning concepts and techniques at all levels of action – from the broad strategic directions to the manner of intervening at the grass-root level.

In summary, in order for urban regeneration to be successful, it has to build on the interaction between two factors: On the one hand, a community driven by shared visions, values and daily cultural practice, and, on the other hand, the reflection of such values in a meaningful physical environment that confirms and supports the collective vision. Continued interchange between intangible cultural ideals and their actual embodiment in tangible spatial forms is of the essence for a vibrant cultural production process. At any rate, the live experience of this chain of mutual exchange provides the basis for people's identification with their environment. Fostering such interactive processes is a precondition for accumulating a cultural capital that can root the present in the past and project it into the future, thereby overcoming the artificial gap between Tradition and Modernity. (Barillet, 2003)

Christian Barillet, Thierry Joffroy, Isabelle Longuet, A Guide for African Local Governments: Cultural Heritage & Local Development, December 2003. Published by Craterre-ENSAG / Convention France-UNESCO.

For a number of reasons, historic towns in the Arabic region are privileged experimental testing grounds for local societies to develop their indigenous versions of Modernity, or, vice-versa, modern versions of vernacular traditions. First, these historic structures, although dilapidated, still convey a symbolic reference to essential and timeless human values that many sterile modern structures are in lack of. Second, the communities inhabiting them today are still rooted in quasi-vernacular lifestyles that are richer in human and cultural substance than those living a westernized life in wealthier districts. Their social bonds, their sense of enterprise and their eagerness to evolve make them potential motors of urban rehabilitation from within. Third, the poor physical condition of historic districts urgently calls for renewal and therefore opens an ideal opportunity for experiments that attempt to adapt the basic morphology of the traditional urban fabric to contemporary needs and facilities. Lastly, examples of successful rehabilitation of historic areas may provide

incentives for the promotion of more qualitative modes of urban development in other residential districts, including the upgrading of informal settlements.

“In order to engage in such experimental modes of Cultural Development, corresponding types of new procedures need to be found. An example would be the alternative approach taken by the Darb al-Ahmar project in Cairo”. (Bianca, 2004) It has relied on open-ended, "organic" processes that unfolded step by step in coherent, but not mechanical ways. Within this context, the first aim was to understand the local society's internal systems and modes of function, as well as to detect the internal resources that are available to it in overt or hidden form. No comprehensive blueprint, no sequential or directional implementation plans were fixed in advance, but custom-tailored layers of action have been formulated in response to perceived local needs and opportunities. At each stage, the consequences of previous interventions were analyzed and taken into account, creating several loops of feed-back. In other words, a tentative holistic vision of desired goals and improvements was implicitly there from the beginning; it unfolded and materialized through a multitude of interrelated and synergetic initiatives that eventually crystallize around the initial core idea, thereby materializing it in its final shape.

Cairo – Rehabilitating an Urban Metropolis », ed. By S. Bianca and Ph. Jodidio, Torino 2004 and 2007.

To sustain such a cyclic and holistic system, interaction between soft and hard project components must be allowed to take place. The hard components include formal constraints such as a master plan, by-laws, administrative procedures that must be formulated in such ways that they encourage the desired development to happen within their boundaries. The soft components relate to live processes that cannot be ordered and controlled from outside, but need to be stimulated from within, by providing appropriate social and economic incentives, coordinating individual initiatives and seizing upcoming development opportunities. These can only be captured through field activities at micro-level that are planned and implemented in close interaction with residents, and that focus on specific sites and their inherent conservation, re-use or redevelopment potentials.

By penetrating the small grain of the social and physical urban fabric, this "Focused Integrated Approach", as it was named, can act in much greater depth than conventional planning methods do. Its particular merits are, first, that it interrelates physical renewal and socio-economic improvement, and, second, combines top-down and bottom-up implementation strategies, adapting them to well-defined places and matching constituencies. Moreover, it enables relatively small integrated interventions, once they have been launched and taken a life of their own, to act like seeds, thus creating a momentum of natural growth that can replicate initial efforts and extend them into larger areas with a minimum of external support. In igniting such self-reproducing systems and processes, it is believed that this is the only realistic way to foster sustainable rehabilitation that will last beyond the completion of particular physical projects. (Barillet, 2003)

Christian Barillet, Thierry Joffroy, Isabelle Longuet, A Guide for African Local Governments: Cultural Heritage & Local Development, December 2003. Published by Craterre-ENSAG / Convention France-UNESCO.

Having stated the need for a particular, qualitatively different treatment of Historic Arabic Sites, one also has to be aware, however, of the functional connections and interdependences that exist between historic and modern urban entities. Historic towns cannot survive in artificial isolation, but need to establish a viable symbiosis with their modern counterparts. Their traditional central areas need to rely on complementary functions and facilities provided by modern districts. Their residential areas need to be protected against the pressures of vehicular traffic and commercial activities in order to retain their special character within the total urban system. Residents of historic towns will have to make certain trade-offs between reduced vehicular accessibility and the potentially high quality of life

provided by a protected historic environment in very central location. How to turn this centrality of historic towns to their advantage, rather than letting it become a source of destruction, is one of the main problems confronting historic towns in the Arabic world today, a problem that must be solved by appropriate legal measures that can regulate the real-estatemarket and at the same time ensure that gains from increasing land values are re-invested in the betterment of the historic town, rather than being skimmed off by private speculation.

The coming years will be decisive for the fate of historic towns in the Arabic world. On one hand, the life span of many of the surviving urban structures comes to an end and will require conservation, repair, upgrading or sensitive plot-by-plot renewal. On the other hand, the dynamics of economic liberalism and globalization in emerging countries will exert unprecedented development pressures, due to the increase in available private investment capital. Since governments will hardly be in a position to save and conserve historic towns with public funds, it will be necessary to attract and control private funds flowing into urban rehabilitation. To this end, it will be essential to anticipate and steer future change pro-actively. This can only be achieved by engaging early on in viable rehabilitation and revitalization scenarios, rather than reacting to destruction post-factum or aiming at unrealistic conservation schemes. What is at stake is far more than the protection of precious physical relics from the past. It is the transmission of a living cultural tradition with its intangible values and customs, its collective rituals projected into spaces and buildings, its environmental responses and its patterns of social conviviality. The goal, then, is nothing else but a living, vibrant and evolving historic urban landscape that has restored its capacities for regeneration from within.

We move on summing up the Arabic methodologies, management, and protection systems of conservation. The Eastern world, is characterized by urban landscapes wherein old buildings are disappearing at an alarming rate and being transformed by new constructions due to high economic growth, technical progress and accelerated town planning such as in the Middle East like Beirut, Lebanon and others in the West, the low-scale historic buildings in the urban landscapes are being overshadowed by high-rises and new architectural jargons. The integrity of the Historic Urban Landscape is at risk and is a matter of current international debates.

Looking back from where we stand today, we seem to have completed a full circle in urban conservation, beginning by saving the integrity of historic monuments by recommending respect to the surroundings of monuments to now embarking on a new cycle of recommending respect to the surroundings of historic urban landscapes in order to save their integrity.

All these past experiences and concepts regarding urban conservation reveal it to have become a broad discipline recognizing cultural diversity embodied in various forms, scales and spirit. The key message being emphasized is to convert passive and object-oriented urban conservation practices into active and culturally oriented continual processes pivoted around human values, with a respect for the past, understanding the present and concern for the future.

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